

the yoga of inner fire: tummo

Kurt Keutzer

The Tibetan practice of Tummo and Indian Kundalini Yoga may flower from different teachings, but they have a common root. The teachings share a lineage from the great Mahasiddhas or perfected masters of ancient India. In fact, Tibetan Buddhism is the last remaining descendant of the marriage between Buddhism and Indian Tantrism.

The concept of Tummo, "the Inner Fire," is not strictly equivalent to Kundalini, "the coiled one." Physically, Tummo is located at the navel chakra, whereas Kundalini is said to reside at the base of the spine. During practice, both Kundalini and the Tummo-fire rise to the crown. In Tummo practice, the *ascent* of the red Tummo-fire rising to the crown has a companion movement, the *descent* of the white-nectar flowing down. The red fire-drop of Tummo at the navel and the white nectar-drop at the crown are more naturally related to other concepts of Hatha Yoga: Surya, the sun, at the navel chakra and Chandra, the moon, at the crown. So while Tummo may not be identical with Kundalini, each term appears to be describing related elements of a common process of energetic transformation.

The core techniques for igniting the Tummo-fire and awakening Kundalini are similar. The most common technique is the *vase breath* or *pot breath*. In this technique, the downward-voiding wind (or energy) and the upper life-sustaining wind are united at the navel chakra. In Kundalini Yoga, this technique is said to ignite the fire of Surya, the sun, at the navel channel, which in turn awakens the Kundalini from its slumber. In Tummo practice, the vase breath loosens the knot at the navel, which allows the red fire-drop of Tummo to mobilize.

In India, both the Buddhist and Shaiva lineages of these teachers have been lost, yet many contemporary Tibetan teachers can systematically trace their lineage back across forty generations.

This direct lineal transmission affects the presentation of the teachings. So, while the core practices of Tummo and

Kundalini Yoga are similar, the path leading to these practices is quite different. Tibetans are much more conservative in their teaching of Tummo than are contemporary teachers of Kundalini Yoga. In Tibetan Buddhism, Tummo practice belongs to the *completion stage of highest yoga tantra*. It is typically only taught at the summit of one's practice after a long series of preparatory steps of mental and physical training. The purpose of these trainings is to ensure that the yogi has the requisite qualities to successfully traverse the path.

The path of the Tummo, like that of Kundalini Yoga, is believed to be a very fast path to enlightenment, but also one filled with obstacles. The numerous preparatory practices are aimed at eliminating obstacles, as well as developing mental stability and physical vitality to endure them.

Tibetan teachers from each of the four schools of Tibet have taken radically different approaches to teaching Tummo in the West. Generally speaking, to pursue Tibetan Buddhism solely with the aim of learning Tummo is much like pursuing Judaism with the hopes of learning the Kabbalah. Tibetan teachers can be extraordinarily evasive! Most carry on the tradition much as it was in Tibet.

Depending on the school, it can take years to be ready to enter into Tummo teachings and practices. Because of this, Tummo practice is not very prevalent in the contemporary practice of Tibetan Buddhism among Westerners. Nevertheless, the dedicated student will persevere to gain instruction. Those few who do persevere to learn and practise Tummo under the guidance of an experienced teacher of Tibetan Buddhism are the fortunate recipients of the world's most sophisticated and enduring yogic legacy. ॐ

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